

# EATING PIZZA IN BRAZIL: POVERTY AND OTHER

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THE ENTIRE WORLD EATS PIZZA, or something that resembles it, such as seafood pizza in Japan or the pizza with fruit Brazilians eat here in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. At LLI-LAS, my concentration is officially Portuguese,

but my true focus lies in food studies. Normally, a student like myself who is interested in learning about pizza would probably focus on the food itself: the toppings, the sauces, or the crust. However, in my studies, I learn about larger social issues through my personal experiences and interest in food. I am currently studying abroad in Brazil and have had the honor of living with an amazing host family of four: father, mother, and two sons, ages 22 and 16. The other night on the way home from an event, we decided to get a pizza for dinner. I did not realize how different the whole process was going to be from the “American” way of getting a pizza. The experience revealed many social and economic issues related to poverty. The following story about eating pizza with my new Brazilian family reveals a deeper social context, beyond gastronomy, in the way pizza is obtained, received, and consumed. Enjoy.

After heading home from an event at 9 o’clock one night, my host *família* and I decided to get a pizza for dinner. We were hungry since it had been eight hours since our last meal; however, the hunger pangs did not speed up the process or cause us to alter our decisions based on convenience. I learned firsthand, a slightly shaking hand, that hungry people are the most patient. The Brazilian pizza industry does not resemble the pizza infrastructure I have been accustomed to in the United States. We did not call ahead to order since cell phone credit is ridiculously expensive. Inevitably, I knew that this experience was going to take a little bit longer than ordering an industrialized fast-food pizza, but I did not realize that this pizza adventure would teach me about larger global issues.

We spent the first half hour driving across town passing various pizzerias and deciding where to purchase a pizza. For my host family, all decisions were based on economic factors rather than convenience,

brand, or specific taste. This made sense because when you are impoverished, finding pleasure in what is cheap or free is most important to one’s mental health and security. We found a place with a *promoção* (special offer) of two “large” 30 cm (12 inch—in the U.S. we call them Personal Pan size) pizzas for R\$16 (about U.S.\$10). We walked up to the gated window to order, but quickly learned they didn’t accept checks or credit cards. I was surprised that they didn’t sell *fiado* (on credit) like so many other things are sold here. Since no one in my family had any cash, my host dad asked me somewhat hesitantly if I could lend him some money. Unfortunately, I did not have any on me. It was late and many Brazilians, in particular my host family, have taught me to be extremely paranoid of being robbed at night. Maybe this paranoia is caused by spending too much time watching the horrible *notícias* (news) on Brazilian television and reading the inexpensive subsidized newspaper; it was quite a new experience seeing actual dead bodies and thieves killing people for what few possessions they have. The Brazilian media as a whole seem to be focused on this type of news coverage, but the locals appear to find great pleasure and security in being able to keep up with the news. I think most people, like my host father, would prefer to enjoy the more expensive “professional” media, but when you make a monthly minimum wage of only R\$555 (U.S. \$370) as a *porteiro* (door guard), the cheap things are always going to be more popular.

At 10 o’clock, we made another trip across town to the ATM so that my host dad could take out barely enough money for our pizza promotion, a three-liter bottle of Coca-Cola (even the poor pay a premium price for the addictive globalized beverage), and a package of mayonnaise and ketchup. You may be asking, “What is with the condiments?” The answer is, “Yes, they put hamburger toppings on pizza in Brazil.” When we returned to the pizza joint, we ordered and waited outside, taking random group photos, singing, and dancing a little bit. I was surprised I did not hear many complaints about hunger. I heard my host dad say once or twice, *estou com fome* (I am hungry) but my host family is used to hunger pangs. For example, my

# SOCIAL ISSUES

by DANIEL HERON

16-year-old brother usually comes home from school hungry because he did not have money to buy lunch or he was unable to get someone to buy him something to eat. Yet, I rarely hear him or anyone in my family complain about being hungry. This cultural difference was unique to my American experience where there are many comments and complaints while waiting at a restaurant. I began to realize that, as Americans, we tend not to enjoy being or even communicating with each other while waiting for our meals. Here is a tip for my fellow Americans—order an appetizer, it helps. Whether in Brazil or the United States, food is something to be appreciated, and our relationship with it should be respected and treated with patience. I think witnessing poverty allows one to realize this.

Finally, arriving home around 11 o'clock, my host family and I sat down to eat but we ended up “discussing” how to cut the pizza so that all five of us could get some. To add to the confusion, my host dad brought home a roller cutter that left my host mom confused about how to use it. Cutting the pizza seemed obvious to me; however, it was something new for her. My host mom had a difficult life growing up, and her lack of formal education and poor health (obesity) contribute greatly to her limitations. To make matters worse, her husband and sons do not hear her cry for help. A couple of years ago she was diagnosed with Type-II diabetes, and she depends on the free medications that the government provides her to survive each day. With no outside income or allowance from her husband, her life consists of household chores, watching television, attending mandatory health meetings, and receiving free treatments at various clinics. I wonder how much she understands from those meetings? I don't expect her, or anyone for that matter, to fully comprehend nutrition, but it is really difficult

for me to help her understand that there is a lot of sugar in the coke she drinks as well as in the ketchup she puts on the pizza.

We all knew the large pizzas were not going to be enough to fully satisfy us, so we decided to make rice. We ate white rice to fill our stomachs, and the pizza was to give some flavor. The luxury of eating pizza seemed to raise my family's self-worth; it was an outlet that assisted with the struggles of poverty. I do not like to say that my host family is poor, but I have to accept the reality of their poverty when I see them argue over *centavos* (cents), water down juice, liquefy *feijao*

(beans), tell each other constantly to put more rice on their plates, and repeatedly ask me to pardon them for being “humble.” Yet, the vocabulary they use never criticizes the life they live; I never hear them mention the words *poor*, *unhealthy*, or *sad*. Instead, I hear expressions of gratitude and other positive comments about life. Since I am a guest, more healthful changes are happening at home: the unused plates come

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out, the kitchen and dishes are cleaned more often, more fruits and vegetables are added to the daily rations of rice and beans, and we even brought a pizza home to enjoy—something they have never done before. I want a healthier life for them, not just for me. I fear when I go away that many of these changes will revert to the old way. I can only hope our exchange of ideas and cultures will benefit all of our lives. I realized that I was not just sharing with them what has helped me in my life, but they were teaching me about what has helped them in theirs. Our pizza adventure that had begun three hours earlier finally concluded when we finished eating around midnight. 🌟

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